ALL NATURE SINGS
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Psalm 96
Luke 12:22–31

"Let the sea roar . . .
the field exult . . .
all the trees of the forest sing for joy."
Psalm 96:11–12 (NRSV)

Most of the important laws for the conduct of human life probably are religious in origin—
laws such as these: be merciful, be forgiving, love your neighbors, be hospitable to strangers,
be kind to other creatures, take care of the helpless, love your enemies.
We must, in short, love and care for one another and the other creatures.
We are allowed to make no exceptions. Every person's obligation toward the creation
is summed up in two words from Genesis 2:15: "Keep it."

Wendell Berry
Citizenship Papers

You may have seen a report on television last evening that Presbyterian churches have been threatened with arson.

Friday afternoon we received word that the national headquarters of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Louisville received an anonymous letter threatening arson against Presbyterian churches for "your anti-Israel and anti-Jewish attitude."

General Assembly officials passed the information along to all Presbyteries and congregations Friday.

Fourth Church House Staff, including our security service, is on alert. And we have alerted the Chicago Police Department, which will be keeping our church under surveillance today and in the days ahead.

We also received a communiqué from the American Jewish Committee, signed by Emily Soloff, Executive Director, and Rabbi Ira Youdavin,

Executive Vice President of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, expressing their shock at this morally reprehensible threat.

For the past weeks I have been engaged in conversations with rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community about issues that have arisen after the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in its meeting last June, voted to initiate a process of selective, phased divestment from corporations whose business in Israel is harmful to Palestinians and Israelis.

The General Assembly also took several other actions that the Jewish Committee has found troubling, anti-Israel, anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic.

The Jewish Community is also distressed by a visit by a delegation of Presbyterians to the Middle East and our partner churches, during which the group met with leaders of Hezbollah, and by remarks made after the visit by one of the members of the group to the press. General Assembly officials have announced that the visit with Hezbollah representatives was unauthorized and the comments reprehensible, and two General Assembly employees have been dismissed.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has supported a safe and secure State of Israel since its founding in 1948 and a safe and secure and independent Palestinian state behind internationally recognized borders. We have tried to be an advocate for a just peace that takes into account the freedom and human rights and safety of Israelis and Palestinians.

And we have tried to be supportive to partner Christian churches in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria.

The Session of Fourth Presbyterian Church devoted much of its meeting last week to this matter and is crafting a response, which it will communicate to the Jewish community.

Our relationship with our Jewish brothers and sisters is precious to us.

We will continue to talk with and cooperate in mission and engage in dialogue with our neighbors at Congregation Sinai.

We will never abandon these important relationships.

God of all people, all races, all nations, we ask your blessing today on the American Jewish Community, on its leaders and rabbis, its synagogues and organizations. Your covenant people, chosen to be a light to the Gentiles, to us, are our friends, and we pray your blessings upon them.

We pray for the Palestinian people, Muslim and Christian, as they mourn the death of a leader and prepare for a new time ahead.

We pray for Muslim brothers and sisters in this country, concluding their observance of Ramadan, for their mosques and organizations.

And we pray for our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in this difficult hour. As its people and ministers, officers and choir members, Sunday school teachers and children gather today, all over our country, bless it, protect it, and help it to be your faithful church, expressing the light of your love in Jesus Christ. Now startle us again with your love. Amen.

O, sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth. . . .
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar . . .
let the field exalt . . .
. . . all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

I love Psalm 96.

One of the things I try to do every summer is read through the Psalter in the early morning. Now you can read the psalms any time of the day or year and in any circumstance, but my favorite way is sitting in a rocking chair with the first cup of coffee of the day while looking out over the ocean.

So it was last August that I read Psalm 96, “Let the heavens rejoice, let the sea roar,” on the day Hurricane Charley arrived. The sea roared. After three decades of traveling to North Carolina for a week or two in the summer, we finally found ourselves facing a real hurricane. I am deeply grateful that no one was harmed and property damage, while inconvenient, was not critical.

We watched on the Weather Channel as the storm approached, which itself was an odd experience because the weather outside continued to be clear and sunny.

As clouds moved in, the television told us more details about wind speed and landfall, but still it was difficult to imagine anything out of the ordinary happening.

On the day itself, I did what I always do: make coffee, sit in a rocking chair, read the psalms.

Let the heavens be glad . . .
let the sea roar.

Late in the morning that is exactly what happened. We had been told that a voluntary evacuation order had become mandatory, so cars were packed; we were ready to go. The rain began gently, and then, and then suddenly, incredibly suddenly, the wind and rain increased and the ocean roared. In a matter of minutes, the single road that runs the length of the barrier island was submerged. We drove slowly, and I found myself remembering an article I read once about a Duke University study that concluded that barrier islands are not a friendly environment for human beings and houses and that sooner or later nature will make that point.

We made it to the causeway and the mainland and ended up in a high school along with 500 other vacationers and locals, some of whom came with sleeping bags, coolers full of food, and portable television sets. We had beach chairs and a can of peanuts. Everybody was exceedingly courteous, and the Red Cross volunteers responsible for the operation were wonderful. Lunch was served in the school cafeteria. Charley came and went while we stayed away from glass windows, and by late afternoon we were back at the beach house, driving past a roof that had been lifted from a beachfront house and deposited on a parked SUV. Our place suffered one large window shattered.

For someone who lives in the city mostly—which means insulated mostly from the challenges and even the reality of nature—it was, on measure, a good experience. And I will never read Psalm 96, with the sea roaring, without remembering it.

Our relationship with the natural world is critical and, for city people, particularly unique, because we live at a significant distance. We might purchase a parka at North Face and drive up and down Rush Street in a sport-utility vehicle with a rhino bar over the front grill, but the fact is that city living is several huge steps away from the realities of the natural world —a point eloquently made last Wednesday when a truck pulled up to the corner of Chestnut and Michigan and left a trailer advertising vacations in Mexico. The walls of the large trailer were clear plexiglass. Inside a sandy beach had been created, complete with beach chairs, umbrella, beach balls and three attractive young women dressed appropriately for the occasion. It was, needless to say, quite an attraction and a distraction to motorists. I first saw it during a luncheon we hosted in the Randolph Room for neighborhood social service agencies: clergy and nuns and social workers meeting to discuss collaborative efforts and we overheard Salsa music and looked out the window to see this amazing sight.

In his most recent book on the Twenty-Third Psalm, Rabbi Harold Kushner observes that ever since the invention of electricity, human beings have been liberated from the basic dichotomy and rhythm of nature: light and darkness, day and night. No one wants it any other way, but electricity allowed civilization to ignore a fundamental rhythm of life, allowed people to work and play all night long. He does not propose an alternative to the bright lights and relentless noise of urban culture, but he does propose that we acknowledge what has happened to us. A member of his congregation called him to ask if it was appropriate to use an electric menorah as a substitute for the real candles that are lighted on each night of Hanukkah. Kushner told her that there are circumstances when an electric menorah was preferable, but generally "one does not recite the traditional Hanukkah blessing over a light bulb. To turn on an electric light is to be in the presence of a human artifact. To kindle a fire, to light a candle, is to be in the presence of one of God's gifts to the world" (p. 43).

In a chapter on the verse "He makes me lie down in green pastures," Kushner's argues that grass is green and sky is blue because those colors are calming and reassuring to human beings and they reflect a creation made carefully for our sustenance and comfort. When we're stressed out, it's because we have too many reds and blacks and whites, too much noise and bright light, and for relief we head for the greens and blues—the green of mountain and forest, the blue of ocean, lake, sky.

Deep in our faith tradition is a pair of profoundly important affirmations: one, that creation, nature, has a creator; that the natural world is made by, intended by, sustained by God.

And two, that the creator is fundamentally good, and so the creation is also fundamentally good. We live on the earth and in a dependent relationship with the earth because that is how we are made. That is how God intends it. Our health and well-being, our stability and sanity, our survival depends on a right relationship with God's creation.

We Christians have not consistently held onto that basic assertion, which is at the very heart of our Hebrew ancestry. God saw everything that God made, Genesis said, and called it good, very good. But there is another way of describing reality, as old as history itself, and that is that creation is not good, that God and creation are at odds, at war even. In some of the most ancient versions of this tradition, there are two Gods: the God of the spiritual, ephemeral world who resides in the heavens, and the God of creation, which is corrupt and mortal, the source of evil, sin, and death. It's called dualism, and it is the background against which the biblical doctrine of creation was articulated.

God is good, merciful, and kind. God's creation is good; the created order reflects the goodness of God; human beings, human bodies, are fundamentally good; human life is fundamentally good. Bad and tragic things happen, of course, but not because creation is bad. Sometimes humans behave badly with tragic results. And sometimes accidents happen in the freedom of God's created order. Sometimes people live in the hurricane's path, or an individual genetic situation is different, or individual cells start to behave peculiarly and destructively. But our tradition, our Judeo-Christian tradition and worldview, rests on the fundamental assertion that creation is God's and therefore good.

Things go badly when we forget that. In his fine little book, *Credo*, William Sloane Coffin—who, so far as I know, spent most of his life in cities—says modernity has divorced nature from nature's God. We need, Coffin says, to "re-sacralize nature," to re-wed nature and nature's God. There is no other way to save our environment. And it begins in the human spirit—with wonder and awe and reverence. It begins when, by act of will, we see through what we have made—the blacktop streets, concrete and glass and steel skyscrapers, flashing neon lights, blaring noise, all the wonderful stuff of human civilization—see through it and above it and below it to the earth and sky, the creation God has made. "It may be that as civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines," Coffin says, and a renewal of reverence, of awe and wonder before the mystery and magnificence and goodness of creation just might save us. (See p. 113.)

Science can help. The truth is the more we study and investigate, the deeper gratitude and reverence become. Raw science, instead of explaining away the fundamental mystery of life, enhances and celebrates. Science documents the improbability of our being here. If the elemental philosophic question is "Why is there something rather than nothing?" science points the way to an answer. Science knows, for instance, that if the slow expansion of an incredibly dense fireball over the period of 750,000 years had been a millionth of a second slower, the universe would have collapsed, or one millionth of a second faster, no planets would have been formed. If the nuclear blast, the "big bang," had been slightly weaker there would be no oxygen, only hydrogen. Had it been slightly stronger, there would be only helium.

Albert Einstein once said that the existence of human life as a product of random, unrelated cosmic accident is as plausible as an explosion in a print shop producing the unabridged dictionary.

The critical moral question that emerges from all of this has to do with the care of the earth. If the earth is God's creation, if it belongs to God, then we are guests, temporary at that. In fact, the Bible says that we have been given responsibility for the management of the place during our tenure. It is

ours to live in and enjoy and to care for and turn over to our children and grandchildren. Obviously we haven't done so well on that score. In fact, we appear mostly to be uncaring, rude houseguests who leave the place far worse for our having been here. It is an ethical issue, a theological issue. The care of God's creation ought to be a moral value we can all agree on regardless of our religious or political affiliation.

And yet the environment routinely fails to stimulate much political excitement. The fact is that the U.S.A. makes up 4 percent of the world's population and produces 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. The fact is that instead of working on ways to reduce that percentage, we are more invested in oil drilling and production.

Somewhere this has to get personal. At some point deep in the heart and soul of each one of us, we come to some basic accommodation with creation, with our personal relationship with nature, and with nature's God.

One day Jesus said, "Consider the birds; consider the lilies of the field; how they grow, they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." The point was to tell his followers to quit worrying about peripheral matters, like clothing and what's for dinner, and pay attention to important matters. And he chose to teach by pointing to nature, creation, to birds in flight and wildflowers gloriously adorning a hillside.

He understood. He knew what the warm dirt of a well-used path felt like to his sandaled feet. He knew the spectacular beauty of a lily, the sweet sensual aroma of grass after it rains, the fresh sting of the breeze on your cheek out on the lake, the intoxicating vastness of a starry sky at midnight.

At some point we come to some accommodation, some conclusion about our relationship with nature and nature's God.

It begins, particularly for those of us who live in the insularity of a big city, by looking and seeing. Tom Long remembers a cold late afternoon on the Eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, waiting for a sunset. When it came, it wasn't much—on a scale of one to ten, about a four—so he turned his back, watched his dog foraging in the tall grass. In a few minutes his wife grabbed his arm. "Look, look!" The sky had been transformed into a glorious blaze of color. "She could see and I couldn't," he remembers. "She was looking at this absolutely luscious display of the glory of God and I was facing in the wrong direction" (*Testimony,* p. 119).

Anne Lamott added a third prayer to her two favorite daily prayers: in the morning, "Help me, help me, help me"; in the evening, at bedtime, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." She recently added, "Wow!" which she says we

ought to pray at least once every day. I'm adding a fourth. It's actually an admonition, not a prayer, an invitation to pray "Wow" and "Thank you." It is "Look, look!"

See through and above and below what we have made to what God has made.

"Look, look," the poets urge.

e e cummings:

> thank you God for most this amazing
> day: for the leaping greenly spirits of
> trees and a blue true dream of sky.

"Look, look," Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote, and I try to read every autumn:

> O world, I cannot hold thee
> Close enough!
> Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
> Thy mists that roll and rise!
> Lord, I do fear
> Thou'st made the world too
> beautiful this year.

Look, look, and listen too. All nature sings; the trees of the forest sing the creator's praise, the psalmist said.

Try it sometime: look up into the vast branches of a giant beech tree on an autumn afternoon as leaves are falling and listen to the singing.

Wendell Berry:

> Slowly, slowly, they return
> To the small woodland let alone.
> Great trees, outspreading and upright
> Apostles of the living light.
>
> Patient as stars, they build on air
> Tier after tier a timbered choir,
> Stout beams upholding weightless grace
> Of song, a blessing on this place.

O, sing to the Lord a new song;
    sing to the Lord, all the earth. . . .
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;

let the sea roar . . .
let the field exalt . . .
. . . all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

Amen.